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ABSTRACT

This report, which summarizes a series of studies conducted to ascertain the extent to which visually impaired persons use the programs of the Library of Congress National Library Service for the blind and physically handicapped (NLS), presents an overview of findings concerning the size and demographic characteristics of the household target population, the extent of reading and use of reading media, awareness and use of the NLS, characteristics of users and nonusers of the NLS, reasons for nonuse of the NLS, the potential for and obstacles to the expansion of the NLS, the potential for utilization of the talking book program in health care institutions, and the concerns of regional librarians. (FM)

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Reading with Print Limitations

Executive Summary

Findings from: A Survey to Determine the Extent of the Eligible User Population Not Currently Being Served or Not Aware of the Programs of the Library of Congress, National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped

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OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

ABSTRACT

Over 3 million Americans ages 6 years and older who reside in private households and health care institutions are either unable to read, or use regular print, or have difficulty in doing so. Approximately 12 percent of the target household population and 2 to 4 percent of the target institutional population are currently using the Talking Book and Braille program of the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS/BPH).* Another 3 percent of the target household population formerly used NLS materials but stopped over a year ago. Awareness of the NLS program is about 57 percent in the target households and even higher--86 percent--among institutional staff. About 25 percent of the nonuser group expressed considerable interest in trying the present program, and there appears to be considerable potential to expand use of the program among nonusers who are not presently interested in trying the program by enhancing still further various aspects of the program.

HOUSEHOLD POPULATION

Size and Demographic Characteristics of the Household Target Population

Of the 2.64 million Americans in the target population who live in private households, 46 percent have limitations of a single type--either visual, physical, or learning--and 54 percent have multiple reading limitations, or limitations of several types. The great majority of

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*The acronym "NLS" is used here and throughout this volume to designate the federal agency, located in Washington, D.C., which coordinates the cooperative network of libraries serving the blind and physically handicapped.

persons with print limitations (83 percent) are vision impaired. In contrast to the general population where only 11 percent or so of the population is 65 years or older, about 47 percent of the potential users of the Talking Book and Braille program fall within this age bracket. Among the elderly, visual limitations associated with the aging process are the primary obstacles to reading regular print. Additionally, 26 percent of the target population is hard of hearing--an impairment that may restrict their ability to comfortably listen to Talking Books--and nearly 75 percent have at least one serious chronic health condition in addition to their limitations in reading print that may affect their ability to write away for materials, use a telephone, collect or send off books through the mail, operate the record and cassette players, or read for more than a few minutes without fatigue.

Apart from these limitations, the target population living in private households is remarkably similar to the national population; for each age group, the two populations exhibit many of the same social and demographic characteristics. The primary exception is in the area of attained education--the adult target population is considerably less well educated than the adult population at large--but it is an exception that may have profound implications for this special population's receptivity to and interest in the National Library Service program. As in the general population, interest in reading and level of reading activity are most highly associated with educational attainment. The prevalence rate for print limitations is 12 per 1,000 persons nationally, with only minor regional variations.

We found that the target population could not be readily summed up by sweeping generalizations: individual behavior and accomplishments among persons with print limitations are as varied as those found in the general population. Persons with severe print limitations are found in every conceivable occupation and participate in a broad range of hobbies and leisure activities, including watching television, to the same extent as the general public. Similarly, their reading interests are as diverse as those of persons without reading limitations and follow along the same lines as the general population.

Extent of Reading and Use of Reading Media

We found that about 75 percent of the persons with print limitations did some kind of reading in the month prior to our study; 95 percent of the adults in the general population are reported to have read in the past month. Since only 12 percent of the target population are using NLS materials (though 20 percent use any kind of library), many persons who are potentially eligible for the NLS program are reading materials obtained from other sources. Of the persons with print limitations who read, slightly more than half read regular print most frequently, in spite of their visual limitations and/or limitations in holding books, turning pages, sitting up, remembering or concentrating, or in reading for more than a few minutes without fatigue. The second most popular way of reading, being read to by another person, is most popular among 19 percent of the persons who read; followed by recordings, which are used most often by 15 percent of those who read; and large print, which is used most often by 14 percent. Braille is used most often by only 2 percent of the persons who read. Overall, there appears to be upwards of 60,000 persons (and perhaps as many as 100,000 based on this study and other recent independent findings) who use braille for one purpose or another; in contrast, about 20,000 of the persons who use braille are current users of NLS braille books and magazines. Almost all of these persons are legally blind. The low utilization of braille among most segments of the print-limited population, With the exception of the congenitally blind and adventitiously blind professionals (who appear to be inveterate braille users), combined with the high production costs of braille, suggests that unless this medium is more actively supported with research funding, and with new administrative mechanisms to enhance teaching methods in the public schools and rehabilitation agencies, braille may one day become virtually obsolete for book reading. Statistics from independent studies indicate a trend of declining braille use among legally blind school children.

Awareness and Use of the NLS

The 12 percent utilization rate of the NLS among persons in the household target population is roughly

comparable to the rates of use for the other organized helping services we studied; visiting nurses, rehabilitation home teachers, vocational training, counselling, recreational services, transportational services, and help with housework were all used to just about the same extent. Interestingly, as many as three-fourths of the NLS users are legally blind, while only about 20 percent of the visually impaired nonusers have obtained such certification. These findings suggest that there is a strong association between certification and readiness to accept and utilize special reading services, and also between getting certified and becoming aware of or being referred to special compensatory programs.

Characteristics of Users and Nonusers of the NLS

We found that a higher proportion of the current NLS users are young, white, relatively well educated, and work in white collar professions than are nonusers. In addition, a larger proportion of the NLS users were accustomed to using libraries prior to the onset of their reading limitations than were nonusers. Perhaps one of the most significant findings about the NLS users is that although many of them have serious reading limitations, 19 percent read regular print and 16 percent read large print in addition to reading recorded and/or braille materials; over 70 percent of the nonusers read print. About half of the persons in both groups use another person to read to them sometimes. Current users were also found to read more heavily (i.e., to spend more time reading) than nonusers and to be more independent readers: to illustrate, only 13 percent of the NLS users had someone else read to them as their primary reading medium, compared to 21 percent of the nonusers. Likewise, nonusers were found to get more help than users in selecting and obtaining reading materials. This is not surprising in light of the fact that current users also tend to be healthier, more mobile, and to have fewer specific reading limitations than nonusers.

Reasons for Nonuse of the NLS, the Potential for, and Obstacles to Expansion

The most frequently offered reasons for not using the NLS program were: lack of interest in reading generally and in print alternatives, not enough time, and health and disability conditions that were felt to be either too severe or not severe enough to merit going to the trouble of establishing one's eligibility for the program and obtaining and learning to operate the NLS equipment and materials.

Taking a conservative estimate, one-fourth of the nonuser population expressed a significant interest in the Talking Book and Braille program. Since nearly 90 percent of the target population is not currently using the program, a substantial expansion appears to be possible.

The greatest interest in trying the program was voiced by the parents of children with dyslexia and other learning problems, who tend to be less aware of the program, and whose eligibility for it falls under the NLS rubric of "reading limitations stemming from 'organic dysfunctions.'" the causes of which are often difficult to clinically assess. It would seem that expanding the eligibility criteria for the current services provided by the NLS to cover all persons who might benefit from the program, whatever the source of their disorder, would not substantially outstrip the present capacity of the NLS, since the great majority of persons in the target population who are able to read regular print prefer to do so than to utilize alternatives to print. For example, only 1 percent of the current users of the NLS have only learning limitations; hence, this population is not likely to make much use of the current program. Blacks, we found, also have a strong interest in trying the program, although they tend to be less familiar with it than are whites. Many persons with primarily physical limitations in reading and older persons who have nonreading physical problems in addition to their visual limitations also expressed an interest in the NLS program, but persons in these groups frequently indicated that they were unable to operate the record or cassette players by themselves.

These findings suggest that if the NLS wishes to attract the largest segment of nonusers who now use print alternatives to a limited degree, it will have to modify its equipment so it is simpler to comprehend, easier to operate, and generally more responsive to the needs of the elderly, the frail, and the multiply impaired. Similarly, a greater number of high interest/low vocabulary level reading materials and shorter length reading materials may attract more of the current nonusers--whose educational attainments are generally lower than those of users, and whose health is often poorer--to the program. Current users called for an expansion of the number and variety of selections, particularly nonfictional, informational materials, and professional and research materials. The latter informational materials might also increase the interest in the NLS program among persons whose reading needs exceed the recreational materials presently emphasized by the NLS. Evidently, these informational needs are not presently being adequately or conveniently served by the many sources of print alternatives other than the NLS. Perhaps enhanced cooperation between the NLS and the growing number of radio reading services that primarily read local newspapers and magazines over communication sidebands of FM radio stations will satisfy some of the needs for timely informational materials. The current users have also expressed an interest in lighter, smaller, and more portable cassette and record players, and ones that have better tone quality for extended listening and are compatible with hearing aids. Older NLS users frequently indicated that the NLS four-track cassette players are especially difficult and frustrating to use. It appears that the complexity of the four-track cassettes in some cases threatens their self-confidence and lessens their interest in the program.

In addition to low awareness and physical inability to effectively utilize the present NLS services independently, another factor that may help to explain the high degree of nonuse of the program among persons who are potentially eligible for it is the lingering image of the NLS as a program for the blind. The persistence of this image is apparent from the fact, noted above, that over 75 percent of the NLS users are legally blind, compared to about 20 percent of the nonusers. The other side of the coin is that only 2 percent of the users do

not have vision impairments. It appears, then, that an even more vigorous campaign than the one already underway may be necessary to convince persons with physical limitations in reading that Talking Books are indeed intended for them as well as for the visually impaired. At present, active rehabilitation agencies for the blind and established and vocal advocacy groups of and for the blind are two of the major sources of referral to the Talking Book and Braille program. Unfortunately, there is not a comparable network of organizations for the physically handicapped and the learning disabled that refer eligible persons in these categories to the NLS at present. Hence, the awareness and the utilization rates for these two groups are somewhat lower. Our survey of national organizations for the physically handicapped indicated a low awareness of the need among these persons for print alternatives.

The NLS and public libraries are currently used by less than 2 percent of the target population to obtain information relating to their special needs. In light of this, the NLS may want to expand its current efforts to promote the information and referral services of the network libraries.

Although as many as 45 percent of the nonusers of the NLS program reported, upon hearing a description of it, that they could not foresee any particular problems with using the program or any reasons why they would not want to try it, there does appear to be considerable reluctance among persons with print limitations to accept their need for alternatives to regular print. This reluctance is evident from the fact that so many of the potential and current NLS users utilize regular print (even with difficulty) or readers more frequently than any other reading medium.

We found that the majority of persons who seek out print alternatives do so within the first 5 years of onset of their print limitations, and that if they are not motivated to seek them out and use them then, they tend not to use them at all. This finding underscores how crucial it is that persons with limitations be referred to the appropriate agencies soon after onset. Less than a fourth of the target population have received

rehabilitation services to help them adjust to and compensate for their reading limitations.

According to our findings, there is no single mode of outreach that is likely to be significantly more successful than any other in increasing the awareness of the NLS among potential users. Slightly less than 40 percent of the respondents who were aware of the program first heard of it by word of mouth (i.e., from other persons) and of those, slightly more than a third learned from someone who had personal experience with the program; about 25 percent first learned from a public service announcement on TV, or radio or from an article in a newspaper or magazine; and the remaining 35 percent to 40 percent first learned from such sources as special schools or classes, rehabilitation programs, clubs and organizations, health services, and libraries. These data suggest that a broad-based outreach and public education program employing radio, television, newspapers, and magazines aimed at the general public is necessary to attract a substantial number of new users. (The NLS has initiated such a program and we encourage its expansion and evaluation.) The health care profession, in spite of its current poor track record in the area of referrals, appears to be in an ideal position to reach and refer many potential subscribers to the NLS, since as much as half of the target population had a medical examination or received some form of medical treatment in the month period to our survey. We would hope that the NLS may find a way to mobilize this source of referrals.

POTENTIAL FOR UTILIZATION OF THE TALKING BOOK PROGRAM IN HEALTH CARE INSTITUTIONS

Virtually all of the above points are borne out by our study of residents in the nation's 30,000 hospitals, nursing homes, and special schools for the blind and physically handicapped. About 1 million persons reside in these institutions. Here, the populations tend to be older, more frail, and to have more than one impairment restricting their ability to read print. The utilization rates of the NLS among institutionalized persons

are rather low: 2 to 4 percent of the residents read with recordings, though probably as many as 50 percent of the residents would qualify for the program. Eighty-six percent of the institutions surveyed were aware of the Talking Book and Braille program, though most institutional staff, like most persons in the general population who are aware of the program, view the NLS as a program for the totally blind, and do not encourage its use among persons with low vision or other reading limitations.

The low utilization rates found in health care residences and hospitals are directly associated with the observed or expressed disinterest on the part of institutional administrators and staff members in providing for and encouraging reading opportunities. The administration of the Talking Book program in institutions is usually performed by activity directors, social service staff, or volunteers who are responsible for arranging for the provision of printed reading materials. We found that if an institution did not make current print materials widely available, it was not more likely to encourage the use of print alternatives, which generally require even more staff involvement; many institutionalized persons (about 50 percent) who might benefit from print alternatives were reported by staff to be unable to obtain access to or to operate the NLS equipment independently. Another facet of the current lack of interest among staff in fostering the use of print alternatives or reading generally is that reading is largely an individual or private activity (though, of course, it might be done as a group), and as such is usually regarded as an asocial activity. Activity directors tend to be more concerned with promoting group activities that will foster social interaction. This is one of the reasons why Talking Books scored lower than television on every criterion of utility posed to staff in our study, with the notable exception of providing intellectual stimulation.

Two factors that were found to be integrally linked to the success of NLS services in health care institutions were the existence of a program champion on the institution's staff who actively encourages the use of Talking Books; and some organizational arrangements

within the institution to systematically order books and magazines from the regional library, distribute them, and operate the equipment. In the absence of these two components, more pressing institutional activities, for which the institution obtains third party reimbursement, consume staff time and attention.

The data suggest that there is much room for NLS regional and subregional libraries to expand institutional use of the Talking Book and Braille program, but that such an undertaking will require innovative techniques, such as the development of volunteer and self-help/mutual aid programs, regular personal contact, and the continual training and encouragement of institutional staff. High staff turnover, especially of nurse's aides, volunteers, and activity staff, who have the major operating responsibility for interacting with residents, thwarts the success of one-time orientation and training of staff members about the NLS. The development of self-help groups among residents may be one means of achieving a bit more continuity, which is essential to the successful introduction of Talking Books into institutions, as well as of providing a positive opportunity to more fully utilize the abilities of the more ablebodied residents.

CONCERNS OF REGIONAL LIBRARIANS

According to our indepth interviews with locally funded and administered regional librarians, many of the librarians are already well aware of a good many of the above points. We found that the major concerns of these libraries and the wide differences in success rates, as measured by utilization and circulation rates, followed from the basic organization, funding, staffing, and orientation of the libraries. The libraries themselves were seen to fall into three categories: (1) healthy units that provided an innovative set of programs including active outreach; (2) fiscally, administratively, and philosophically more restrained units that focused on expanding their collections, converting to cassette players, obtaining more space, and providing basic reader services; and (3) libraries whose fiscal outlook was

poor and that were struggling to maintain themselves. Whereas the federal commitment to the NLS program was about $100 per year per user, the state and local commitment was about $40 per year. Of course, the state and local commitment is substantially multiplied by the participation of local volunteers.

The recruitment and management of volunteers was problematic for some of the libraries and flowed easily for others: success in this area seems to be a key to providing many ancillary services such as customized recording and transcription of texts; duplication; regular outreach to nursing homes, hospitals, and schools; and active reader advisor programs. Toll-free telephone services that enable readers to call in any requests or queries they may have are expanding and appear to be a most effective means of maintaining close contact with subscribers. An issue that merits careful review is the question of whether large print books and magazines ought to be prepared at federal expense, since these materials are both in short supply and great demand by the target population. We would hope that these materials might be supplied by the NLS, but with no reduction of the funds allocated to Braille and Talking Books.

Although automation is now being employed in some states to facilitate the maintenance of profiles on readers' interests, personal characteristics, and usage statistics, the accurate reporting of readership presented a problem for many librarians. Findings from our studies indicate that there is some confusion about NLS terminology and approaches to measuring use of the program. For example, the term "readership" in ordinary usage connotes individual subscription, whereas the NLS defines it to include use of the different media it provides to a given subscriber. For example, one persons may read Braille and Talking Book records, but NLS readership figures would indicate a count of two (2), reflecting the use of two different NLS media. Additionally, the term "deposit collection" is used variously by different institutions, resulting in some confusion as to which institutional NLS users are deposit collection users and which are individual users who reside in institutions but order and manage their own reading materials

from NLS.* NLS also assumes that there is an average of ten institutional readers per NLS deposit collection, but our findings indicate that in most health care institutions (excluding schools for the blind), there are only two to four users per collection.

The growth of subregional libraries in many states is adding responsibilities to the traditional function of the regional library as a source of reading materials to include coordination and support for the more local distribution centers; this has given rise to growing and transitional plans for some of the libraries. Overall, the findings from the interviews with librarians indicate the benefits that might accrue from the adoption of standards for service among the cooperating NLS libraries. We are pleased, therefore, to see that such standards, initiated by the NLS, have recently been prepared by a special subcommittee of the American Library Association, and hope that these will soon become an integral part of the NLS program.

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*We use the term "deposit collection users" to denote those persons who share among them the reading materials and equipment provided by the NLS to an institution for use by more than a single NLS subscriber.